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2005

## UA3/9/2 WKU: The 21st Century Land-Grant University

WKU President's Office - Ransdell

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**WKU**  
**The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Land-Grant University**

In 1862, U.S. Senator Justin Morrill championed landmark federal legislation to create America's system of land-grant colleges and universities known as the Morrill Act. This legislation set aside land in each state to establish a college which focused on agriculture and scientific research and solving drastic problems which affected our nation's economy in the wake of a great Civil War. Senator Morrill's legislation was eventually defined to expedite a practical higher education which would be the impetus for an industrial revolution across our nation.

In 2006, as WKU celebrates its Centennial, we in America enjoy the grandest quality of life on our planet. We produce many of the world's greatest scientists and we collaborate with colleagues across the globe to shape scientific and social policy. The technology which is driving global economic conditions has, indeed, changed over the last 144 years. American's collections of colleges and universities—land-grant and others—provided a birthplace and proving ground for American's solutions to war and peace, manufacturing, transportation, food production and quality, communication, space exploration, and nano-technology.

WKU was not established under Senator Morrill's legislation. Rather, our institution was established by the Kentucky General Assembly to meet the growing need to educate an emerging population across the Commonwealth, to produce teachers and provide a strong core curriculum. Throughout our first 100 years, WKU has served the Commonwealth well. It has grown into a full-scale comprehensive university with strong disciplines, not just in education, but also in the life and physical sciences, arts and humanities, business, and health and human services. A vast array of undergraduate and graduate programs have produced nearly 100,000 graduates from campuses in Bowling Green, Glasgow, Elizabethtown, and Owensboro.

I suggest, however, in our 100<sup>th</sup> year, that the Commonwealth of Kentucky needs WKU more now than at any time since our founding in 1906. As we celebrate our Centennial, we are challenged to transform WKU into an institution which offers a relevant applied curriculum, focused on identifying and solving the problems which affect quality of life throughout Kentucky. The conditions are different than those faced by Senator Morrill in 1862, but the needs and responsibilities of a comprehensive university are similar. WKU, and other comprehensive universities like WKU, are the stewards of the places in which we are located. Western's "place" extends throughout our region of Kentucky, but it also extends to everyone and every place within our reach as an institution. Typically, that reach would be the 25 or 30 counties close to our four campuses, but it also may be anywhere across the Commonwealth or across the globe. WKU faculty, students, and alumni are at work nonstop improving economic, civic and social conditions which affect our state, our nation, and our globe's populations.

WKU's new mission, the fundamental impetus behind our transformation, is that of being the proper steward of our "place." Our responsibility as a university is to take the existing knowledge in our classrooms and laboratories and apply it to the identification in solving of problems within our reach. Educating students is an inherent means to a much more noble and more important end. Our new mandate is to drive the economic vitality of our region. Applied research and relevant public service is our new mission. Civic engagement is our duty. Improving the lives of Kentuckians and beyond is our responsibility. That is what our focus shall be in our second century of service to the Commonwealth. That is what Senator Justin Morrill had in mind in the 1860's. The difference is our mission today is self-composed rather than federally-mandated, but the gravity of our mission is no less important. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Land-Grant Institution is a label I have applied to comprehensive universities like WKU. These are universities where practical education is applied to solutions which will drive the economy and quality of life enjoyed by those who live and work in regions which surround those campuses. Some call it mission creep; I call it mission sprint. We shall pursue this new mission as fast as our faculty can carry us and as boldly as our alumni and friends can provide the means to do so.

Gary A. Ransdell